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ABSTRACT

Literacy for women is a frequently voiced need that most governments recognize officially as a high priority. Despite the expansion of public education, women (particularly poor and rural women) continue to show adult literacy rates lower than those of men. Five key challenges to the attainment of literacy emerge for women. The first challenge is to engage in action while considering simultaneously the powerful contributions made by feminist theory and analysis. Theory is important because it identifies the main factors sustaining gender inequalities and clarifies the historical pattern of subordination; analysis forecasts that the problem of illiteracy of poor women will not be solved through ingenious program design because the problem exceeds technical boundaries. The second challenge is that of strategy. Four strategic challenges are as follows: to combine women's practical and strategic needs effectively; to combine political/psychological knowledge with skills that enable women to generate income; to combat false dichotomies permeating much discourse on social and gender transformation; and to pay attention to the process by which literacy is attained. The third challenge is to select implementing agencies. The fourth challenge is research concerning the literacy of women in four major categories: pedagogical, family/household-related, societal, and state-related considerations. The fifth challenge is policy implementation. (14 references) (YLB)

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CHALLENGES TO THE ATTAINMENT OF WOMEN'S LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

CHALLENGES TO THE ATTAINMENT OF WOMEN'S LITERACY

Literacy for women is a frequently voiced need which most governments recognize officially as a high priority. But despite the expansion of public education over the last three decades, women--particularly poor and rural women--continue to evince adult literacy rates lower than those of men and the proportion of illiterate who are women continues to grow. This article reviews fundamental ideological, material, and institutional obstacles to women's literacy, classifying them into five challenges that must be considered in future literacy programs for women. In addressing these challenges, I examine their enduring power, indicate how they articulate with one another, and underscore some of the contradictions that have emerged in the debate. This discussion, it is hoped, should clarify some of the weaknesses in our identification of problems concerning women's literacy and their corresponding solution.

Literacy is widely accepted as an important personal resource in contemporary society. Yet, the absolute numbers of those unable to read and write is increasing and, in the case of women, some of the relative numbers are also increasing. According to UNESCO data, women represented 63% of all illiterates in 1983, up from 60% in 1970 and 58% in 1960. In both Africa and Asia (the largest developing region) there is a sizable gender gap of 21 percentage points in favor of men (UNESCO, 1989). The women most affected by illiteracy are those who are poor and live in rural areas; they also tend to be women who reside in societies bound by cultural and religious beliefs dictating the separation of the sexes in key arenas of public life.

What accounts for this "failure" to become literate? To what extent is it a failure of the individual and to what degree is it the result of contextual conditions? Do individuals determine their own success in literacy or do other people act as major obstacles in this quest?

Five key challenges to the attainment of literacy emerge for women; they range from a theoretical understanding of the problem to specific strategies for the design and implementation of literacy programs.

1. The Challenge of Feminist Theory

The first challenge in literacy work for women will be to engage in action while considering simultaneously the powerful contributions made by feminist theory and analysis. Existing empirical findings have identified a long list of factors blocking women's access to literacy including lack of time,

family responsibilities, lack of motivation, poverty, opposition by husbands, and difficulties of access to establishments where literacy classes are given. The obstacles to women's literacy are very similar to those affecting women's access to primary education. They are also very similar across culture (Stromquist, 1989). The main difference between the obstacles to the education of adult women and that of girls is that when discussing adult literacy we refer to the "women's lack of time" or "women's responsibilities in the home" while when discussing participation in formal education we speak of "the need for girls to engage in domestic labor" and "the parents' belief that education is not a priority for girls." The similarity between the obstacles to adult women's literacy and girls' participation in primary education (and at subsequent levels) reflects the fact that there is a widespread and pervasive set of forces that shape gender identity; thus, the use women make, and are allowed to make of education, cuts across age and cultural context.

The long list of obstacles to women's literacy is useful for program planning. Yet to rely on purely empirical findings has serious limitations because we risk confusing immediate manifestations of women's subordination with fundamental causes and thus failing to grasp the exact nature of the phenomenon of women's illiteracy. Feminist research has made significant contributions to the understanding of the condition of women in society and also to the condition of women in education.

For a variety of reasons, some linked to the technology of production of goods and to the reproduction of human beings, men

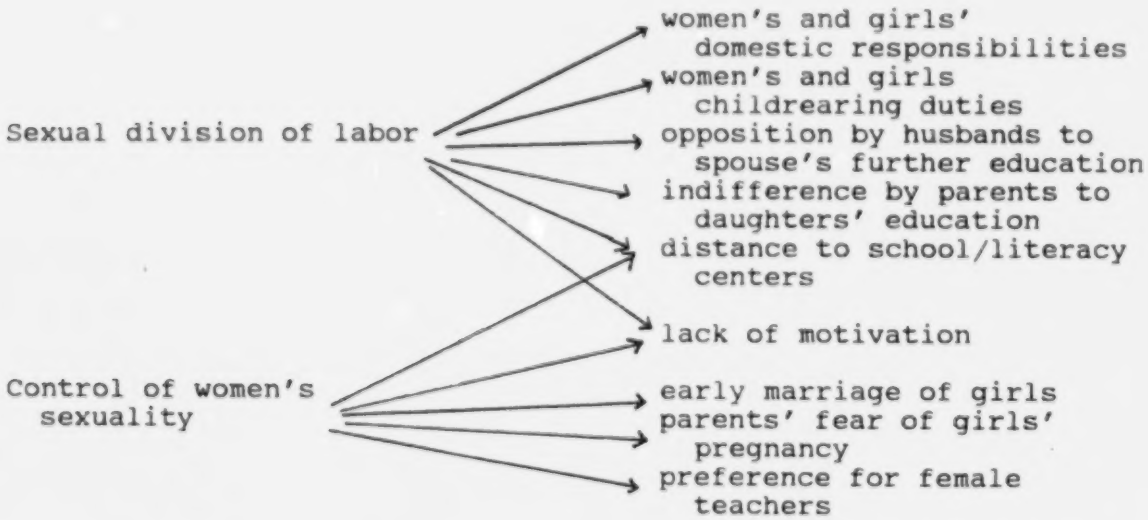
patriarchy that has two mutually supportive components: the sexual division of labor and the control of women's sexuality. Patriarchal ideology today is not so crude as to declare women incompetent but has operated under the principle of complementarity. This principle assigned women the roles of mothers and wives and assumed that these tasks were natural and thus immutable attributes of women. The sexual division of labor has allowed men to have a comfortable existence by eliminating large numbers of women from the public world, by ensuring a cheap and predictable reproduction of children, and by ensuring a cheap and predictable maintenance of the household. Studies of agrarian societies generally reveal that the labor unit most commonly exploited in daily activities is the household, and within it primarily the women. Women, therefore, suffer particularly in rural areas. It should be underscored that when girls help mothers not only are they participating in the sexual division of labor but they are also becoming socialized to be mothers and family caretakers. This socialization that teaches heavy work and obedience includes the development of self-denial attitudes and the aceptance of the importance of family over individual needs (Kinsman, 1983).

The second component, women's sexuality control, was needed to make sure women maintained their roles as wives and mothers. This control operates through the mechanisms of the insistence on women's virginity, the marriage of women very soon after puberty, the sexual double standard, the codes of restricted physical mobility for women, and domestic violence (wife beating).

Sexuality control results in women's inability to control their fertility, which subsequently leads to unwanted pregnancies. The practice of early marriage shapes women's orientation toward husband and family rather than self. Both norms push education away from women's attention. They also limit the mental horizons of women and lead them to accept the sexual division of labor as natural (Stromquist, 1987).

The conceptual framework discussed above allows us to link persistent manifestations of women's subordination in education to underlying causes. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Concrete Manifestations of the Sexual Division of Labor and Sexuality Control upon Women's Education


Sexual division of labor
Control of women's sexuality
women's and girls' domestic responsibilities
women's and girls childrearing duties
opposition by husbands to spouse's further education
indifference by parents to daughters' education
distance to school/literacy centers
lack of motivation
early marriage of girls
parents' fear of girls' pregnancy
preference for female teachers

Thus, women's frequent "lack of time" is really a result of the sexual division of labor that imposes upon them numerous domestic duties; "early marriage" may be seen as a cultural tradition but is primarily a resultant of preserving the virginity of daughters by ensuring they get married shortly after

sexuality control as parents seek close schools that can enable them to have a better supervision of their daughters' sexual behavior and safety.

Several advantages accrue from relying on theory. First, by using theory, causes become not just a string of peculiar events but are systematically linked to a particular condition. This condition does not exist at random but by design of someone whose interests are being served by the existing conditions. In feminist theory, one must admit, this someone is men.

Does it mean that man is thereby identified as the enemy? The term itself--enemy--comes from a very manly exercise, war. The feminist purpose in addressing gender differences is (with very few exceptions) not to destroy men but to create a more egalitarian society in which both men and women will have fuller lives. So theory becomes important because it identifies the main actors sustaining gender inequalities and helps us understand the historical pattern of subordination and why efforts to transform the social order will meet fundamental obstacles. This analysis forecasts that the problem of illiteracy of poor women will not be solved merely through ingenious program design because the problem exceeds technical parameters. If men benefit from the present subordination of women, the (initial) costs of gender transformation for individual men and for the predominantly male state are substantial. It follows that for change to happen these costs will have to be made explicit so that strategies to diminish or modify them are identified.

Theory also helps us to locate obstacles in the social system and not in the individual. A case in point has to do with "motivation". The existing educational literature has made rather excessive use of motivation in explaining the frequent failure of women to complete literacy programs, notwithstanding several empirical observations that the majority of participants enrolled in literacy programs tend to be women.

Motivation is essentially a psychological concept that assumes independence and autonomy on the part of the individual, but women--especially the poor women who constitute the majority of illiterates--lead very constrained existences: not only do they engage in time-consuming survival activities but often their husbands exert significant physical and psychological control over them.

There have been few studies of the family dynamics that are set in motion as adult women seek to become literate. One such effort is a study conducted by Rockhill (1986 and 1987) of Latin American women in English literacy programs in the United States. Rockhill discovered many family obstacles to women's literacy: the husbands' reluctance to have their wives attend classes at night, the women's limited social contact with the outside world that prevented them from attaining fluency in English, the husband and family's expectations that family responsibilities came first, and frequent beatings by the husbands, which fostered a response of conflict-avoidance among women, such as not going to literacy classes for fear this might trigger some domestic violence.

The identification of men as key protagonists made possible

by an explicit theoretical framework allows us to take a more analytical and skeptical view of our social and cultural institutions: the state, religion, the economy, the school system, and the family in particular. These institutions are not only social constructions but are man-made institutions (read male-made) and thus carry a strong gender character. For instance, there are today 24 countries where 70% or more of the women are illiterate and where the gender gap is greater than 10 percentage points (UNESCO, 1988). An examination of these countries (see Table 1) reveals that 16 of them are primarily Muslim or Hindu, while only 8 are primarily Christian. This suggests that religions that restrict women to the domestic sphere or that foster a strong role for women as mothers also tend to limit women's access to education.

Table 1. Countries with Female Illiteracy Rates ≥ 70%. Latest Available Statistics

Country	Religion M	H	C	A	Country	Religion M	H	C	A
Rwanda			✓	✗	Egypt	✓			
Liberia			✓	✗	Burkina Faso	✓			✓
Cameroon	✓		✓	✓	Guatemala			✓	
Comoros	✓				Iran	✓			
Lybia	✓				Nepal		✓		
Morocco	✓				Pakistan	✓			
Mozambique			✗	✓	Saudi Arabia	✓			
Namibia			✓		Syria	✓			
Sao Tome			✓		Bangladesh	✓			
Sudan	✓				India		✓		
Uganda			✓	✗	Democ. Yemen	✓			
Tunisia	✓				Papua New Guin.			✓	

Source: UNESCO, 1988. M=Muslim, H=Hindu, C=Christian, A=Animist. ✓=primary affiliation; ✗=secondary affiliation.

This skeptical look at existing social institutions further enables us to distinguish symbolic from genuine political efforts. Thus, the understanding of the complexity and magnitude

of gender subordination in a given society and how this subordination benefits men allows us to realize that when governments engage in literacy programs with little funding and scarce attention to women's needs and conditions, they are engaging in symbolic politics or strategies that sustain their legitimacy without making substantial accommodations for women.

2. The Challenge of Strategy

Women today face constraints due to their reproductive functions and subsequent--but societally constructed--child-rearing responsibilities. Given today's economic crises in many developing countries, from the Philippines to Cameroon, from Argentina to Zambia, poor women have greater burdens than ever before in taking care of families and children, and ensuring the survival of the family in general. The need to reduce this immediate reproductive burden has has been identified by Molyneux as the practical interests of women. But in addition to these practical interests, Molyneux argues that women face strategic interests, or long-term needs that women have for changing the sexual division of labor, including the condition of women as workers, their legal rights, and their rights as autonomous citizens (Molyneux, n.d.).

While it is true that in the short-run we cannot be oblivious to practical needs of women, we want eventually to move to the resolution of strategic interests. How best to reconcile these interests? What social and political spaces to use and when? In the context of literacy programs for women, one frequent method to increase women's participation in literacy

classes is to offer them when women can attend, i.e., after household work. This is sensible, but such a solution solidifies women's traditional roles as wives and homemakers. To devise programs that only consider only this "solution" amounts to an accommodation by women to the status quo; what we need, in constrast, is to discuss why women and not men face this constraint. So, the first strategic challenge to literacy programs will be how to combine effectively the practical needs and the strategic needs of women, and how to move program content from a reproductive to an emancipatory focus.

A second strategic challenge will be to design literacy programs that combine political/psychological knowledge with skills that enable women to generate income. It is unquestionable that programs that enable women to increase their remunerated work and thus attain economic independence appeal greatly to them. But there is a need not only to develop the productive side of women but also to challenge their gender identity so closely linked to their reproductive role. Thus, income-generating projects must include, when relevant, not only literacy skills but such skills and collective organization, mobilization, and gender consciousness. Several observers have expressed the belief that these skills cannot be offered at the same time because they would overwhelm the women and that, therefore, we should locate the "best model." In my view, such concerns are legitimate but most likely there is no one "best model." The women themselves in any particular program should determine the combinations of knowledge and skill development

that they can handle.

A third strategic challenge will be the work needed to combat false dichotomies permeating much of the discourse on social and gender transformation. Often one hears and reads, particularly in the literature produced by influential donor agencies, that productivity conflicts with equity. The argument insists that first we must have economic growth and the solution of basic needs, and only then can we pay attention to women's problems. "If there is nothing there, there is nothing to share," goes the common slogan associated with this dichotomy. A counter argument is that even at the lowest levels of production, there is unequal sharing. To wait until full production for equitable sharing is misleading because it defines gender as a secondary problem and, more critically, assumes that it will receive attention when the "time comes," which has proven to be extremely problematic even in socialist countries.

The second dichotomy concerns that of efficiency vs. equity. For instance, most people readily admit that it is desirable to have more women teachers in primary schools in many of the developing countries since this might affect positively the enrollment and retention of girls, thus contributing effectively to their attainment of literacy skills. To increase the number of women in the teaching force it is suggested that one should lower admission standards to the teacher training colleges. But often, people voice concern that "if we lower admission standards for entry into the teaching force, this will lower the quality of education." Such an assertion ignores the fact that the majority of teachers in many developing countries are already poorly

trained and that their levels of education tend to be minimal. It is difficult to imagine how lowering the admission rates of women will be a major factor in worsening the educational system when these women will represent the few who will have proper pedagogical training.

The third dichotomy concerns the empowerment of women vs. the their "endangering" or disempowerment. This is a relatively novel argument and goes like this: "If we empower women without offering them structural support, we might be creating a negative situation for them. For instance, what if empowered women challenge their husbands and the situation leads to divorce?" The reply here is that if so, men need women perhaps more than women need men. If women engage in subsistence production and unremunerated services to maintain a household, it is not at all certain that the low salaries of men would cover all these benefits if these were to be (and could be) acquired in the open market. Divorce need not be seen as personal failure but could represent the best alternative to untenable domestic situations. Moreover, many poor women--30% to 50%--are single heads of household. A large number of them, therefore, is not dependent upon husbands. Finally, empowerment means not only enabling women to understand their situation but also enabling them to undertake collective action. A likely result of empowerment, and manifested already in several cases of mobilization against the lack of basic services and domestic violence, is that support mechanisms emerge in the community by which a network of like-minded women can render assistance to other women in times of

crisis or devise actions that are not predicated on single and isolated initiatives.

A fourth strategic challenge will be that of paying as much attention to the process by which literacy is attained as to the outcomes to be obtained. If we make women literate regardless of content, taking the ability to decode and encode messages separate of the content of the messages transmitted in the process and independent of how the process of learning takes place, then we are engaging in the reproduction of patriarchy even though we may believe that literacy helps women. We need to be both vigilant of how women learn and willing to utilize all existing spaces for action. In literacy programs, dealing with previously exploited and subordinated women, we need to design programs that combine the active participation of women both as beneficiaries of these programs and as key persons in the identification of the content of these programs and in the way these programs are delivered.

3. The Challenge of Implementing Agency Selection

Since formal education has been delivered mainly by governments, conventional wisdom has it that governments are also the ones to run literacy programs. The incongruity of this assertion is rather obvious: the institution which did not succeed with individuals in their younger years is now expected to succeed (or to want to succeed) with the same individuals when they are adults.

Evaluations of the Education World Literacy Program (EWLP), the largest experimental effort conducted by UNESCO in the 70s,

provide interesting information about the state as an implementing agency as this effort relied exclusively on national governmental agencies for its execution. The experiment took place in 11 countries and while the evaluation did not address the issue of gender, the findings from these case studies are highly relevant to women and literacy programs.

The case studies found that the presumed advantages of the state[1] in eradicating illiteracy did not materialize. Benefits were presumed to derive from centralization of efforts, coordination, massive outreach, deliberate teacher training, and careful development of materials. The evaluation found weak state commitment in terms of training, reliance on volunteers (and thus neither monetary incentive nor esprit de corps), conflict between government agencies, poor coordination between planning agencies, curriculum insensitivity to local needs, and very few adults actually reached (UNESCO/UNDP, 1976). The lack of coordination among governmental agencies continues to characterize state actions in literacy programs, according to a later report by the UNESCO Regional Office for Asia and Oceania (1979).

Most government programs do not address women as a specific population. A survey by UNESCO of literacy programs focusing on women was conducted in the late 1960's (this study seems to be the only one of its kind conducted by UNESCO). This survey discovered that only seven of 108 countries reported having literacy programs that considered women's needs. But when asked what this involved, the responding countries defined them as efforts to provide women with "means to carry out more

efficiently tasks as mother of the family and housewife" or to cover "feminine aspects such as child-care and sewing" (UNESCO, 1970, p. 11). This position by the state clearly validates what Street has called an "ideological" model of literacy, one of its tenets being that:

> literacy can only be known to us in forms that already have political and ideological significance and it cannot, therefore, be helpfully separated from that significance and treated as though it were an "autonomous" thing (p. 8).

If such is the common pattern and if the state is interested mainly in the reproductive roles of women, there is no compelling reason why other social sectors should not be allowed in the provision of literacy. So there is a need to explore parallel organizations such as the NGOs to a greater extent. There is evidence that these groups provide tailored programs, a greater degree of community participation in program implementation and even in design, and certainly greater outreach. The challenges here are not to equate a small agency with minor effects, nor to equate state with massive outreach and genuine commitment.

The energy and commitment of some women-run NGOs is remarkable. They are not man-hating groups but civil association with a clear understanding of gender issues. I submit that their work has more theoretical clarily than many government projects. These NGOs are more likely and able to engage in holistic education for women by combining literacy with productive skills and gender consciousness. The challenge regarding the implementing agency is a challenge for the donor agencies in particular. Their task here should be to identify the effective

or promising NGOs and fund them beyond literacy program support to enable them to become stable and eventually self-sustaining institutions. This will require that feminist and profeminist officials in these agencies (a) convince their colleagues of the need to consider institutions other than the state in the provision of literacy and (b) that support for the NGOs be expanded to include support for infrastructure, training, and administration.

4. The Challenge of Research

Many aspects concerning women's literacy remain to be investigated. The dearth of studies concerning literacy and particularly women's literacy is appalling considering the magnitude of the problem. Such a lack, unfortunately, is not surprising because academia reflects the priorities of the rest of society and literacy has yet to be seen as an educational issue of significance. While research is important, it also has to be underscored thaat the mere production of new knowledge will not guarantee subsequent action. Therefore, the types of research concerning the literacy of women should be of a particular nature, as we discuss below.

The areas to be investigated could be grouped under four major categories, each with its own set of questions to be examined:

a) Pedagogical considerations:

- Why do women tend to enroll more than men even if time and energy constraints are so strong?

- What are the effective pedagogical strategies for adult

- What combinations of literacy and conscientization skills are feasible? How can they be effectively promoted?

- What are the effective characteristics/abilities of literacy teachers working with women? How can these characteristics/abilities be developed through training?

b) Family/household-related considerations:

- What physical and psychological constraints to women's participation in literacy programs operate at the household level? Conversely, why do women tend to enroll more than men even if time and energy constraints are so strong? What benefits, both educational and noneducational, do women hope to derive from participation.

- In what ways do the involvement of women in literacy programs and their attainment of literacy skills threaten/modify the hierarchy of their households?

- What tactics do husbands and relatives use to prevent women from acquiring literacy?

c) Societal considerations:

- What are the kinds of supportive services women need to complete literacy programs?

- How can we move from practical to strategic interest satisfaction? What successful instances are there?

- What degree of "successful" literacy for women can be expected when societal and economic supports are missing?

- What societal conditions are needed to promote women's retention of literacy skills?

d) State-related considerations:

- Under what political and economic conditions will the

state support a serious provision of literacy skills to women?

- What are the instances of successful literacy programs conducted by state agencies? What measures of "success" are used in these programs?

These questions will have to be addressed through research of a qualitative nature: documenting practices, reporting subtle but cumulative events through the use of in-depth interviews and case studies, observing the persistent role of significant others as blocking agents, identifying variations across the life cycle, and examining the use and impact of discursive practices.[2]

A second important research challenge in literacy will be the production of knowledge through a research process in which the illiterate women are themselves a part. This will require breaking the subject/object dichotomy, i.e., looking at women and enabling them to look at themselves. Action-research and participatory research, therefore, will have to be considered in literacy studies for the processes and outcomes of adult literacy are inexorably linked.

5. The Challenge of Policy Implementation

There are in existence several international declarations and even laws that recognize the importance of women's education. In 1970 the UN officially recognized the need of literacy for women. In 1982, at the 4th extraordinary session of the UN General Conference, UNESCO and the UN recognized the need to work simultaneously with primary education and adult literacy programs. Since these official commitments have already been made, developing countries asking for international development

assistance should be reminded of the declarations.

Another important leverage concerns the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This convention, which has the force of international law, has been ratified by 54 countries (Sivard, 1985) and thus stands as a critical precedent in the conduct of human affairs. Article 16 of this convention gives women and men equal rights in marriage and decisions on the number and spacing of children. Significantly, most of the countries which have not yet ratified the convention include African and Arab countries with high rates of female illiteracy. This is an area where international pressure may have to be brought to bear in order to affect positively the educational levels of women.

While laws and official commitment exist, their follow-up with concrete programming has been lagging. The challenge here for feminists and profeminists will be twofold. First, they must lobby governments to force their attention upon adult educational programs, traditionally the forgotten component in the educational system. Second, feminists and profeminists, particularly in developed countries, must convince their international aid agencies to use social groups outside the state or parallel to it for the provision of literacy for women.

Conclusions

The challenges facing the literacy of women are serious, even formidable. But this does not mean that they cannot be successfully met. They will have to be considered simultaneously and they will need persistent attention. Action without theory,

decoding/encoding skills without an understanding of how oppression emerges, the unequestioned used of state agencies, the accumulation of unanswered questions regarding literacy processes, and legislation without enforcement will continue to plaque literacy programs for women unless women and men committed to social transformation pool resources and take a long-term stand.

The international literacy year of 1990 is a welcome measure to bring attention to the problem of literacy but even a decade of attention and financial assistance will not be enough. New actors--particularly women and NGOs--must be included in future efforts. States will have to learn to work with parallel organizations. Finally, men will have to be persuaded that while some differences between men and women do exist, the differences of a biological nature are much smaller than those which have been socially constructed. Men will also have to be persuaded that they can have fuller lives as a new social order emerges. A yet-to-be explained phenomenon is that women currently live longer than men by an average of seven years, in both the developed and developing countries.[3] Could the redefinition of gender roles perhaps alter present longevity statistics? Could the promise of a longer life perhaps convince some men to try new ways? If so, to the five challenges described above, we could add one great hope.

NOTES

[1]States are different in their degrees of commitment to democracy, their attitudes vis-a-vis the open market, and the provision of social services. However, they tend to coincide in considering women a second priority in many of the policies they formulate. This has been amply documented in examinations of women's conditions in socialist and capitalist countries, as well as in old and new nations. Exceptions do exist, such as the case of Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

[2]Research identifying popular sayings with negative references to women in a particular country, such as that reported by Junge and Eshete (1989) for Ethiopia, offer significant promise for capturing the influential but elusive social representations of the women's roles.

[3]By ages 45-50 in developed countries and 60-65 in developing countries, men decrease noticeably in numbers compared to women. Men also have shorter lives in urban than rural areas. See UN, 1988, for compelling data showing the longevity of men and women across 15 different age groups. The difference in longevity has been attributed to several causes: the women's stronger cardiovascular system, the women's greater productivity of estrogenes, and the men's longest exposure to stressful jobs.

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